

# How Can We Approach the Rich Symbolism of Revelation 17?

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As we embark on this humble exploration of [Revelation 17](#), we must approach this complex and often misunderstood chapter with reverence and an open heart. Following the dramatic events of the seven bowls of God's wrath in [chapter 16](#), this section of Revelation introduces us to new symbolic imagery that demands careful interpretation. The book of Revelation, penned by the apostle John, is rich with symbolism and prophetic imagery that has intrigued and challenged believers for centuries. In this article, we will carefully examine [Revelation 17](#) verse by verse, seeking to understand its message within the context of biblical prophecy and its relevance to our faith journey today. We'll explore how this chapter connects to the preceding narrative and contributes to the overall apocalyptic vision of John. Before we begin, let us pray for wisdom and discernment, remembering the words of [James 1:5](#): *"Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him."* This wisdom is particularly crucial as we navigate the intricate symbolism and profound truths contained in this chapter.

Chapter 17 opens with the Great Prostitute. [Revelation 17:1-2](#) reads: *"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me: 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the notorious prostitute who sits on many waters. The kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her, and those who live on the earth became drunk on the wine of her sexual immorality.'"* These opening verses present a powerful image: a notorious prostitute on many waters. In biblical symbolism, prostitution often represents false religion and unfaithfulness to God ([Ezekiel 16:15-16](#)). The Great Prostitute likely symbolizes a global religious system associated with the Antichrist, the *"mother of all prostitutes."* This aligns with the widespread corruption described, echoing [Jeremiah 51:7](#). The *"many waters"* symbolize peoples, nations, and languages ([Verse 15](#)), reminiscent of [Isaiah 17:12-13](#). This false religious system's influence is far-reaching, affecting both the powerful and common people, permeating all levels of society. The imagery of intoxication suggests a corrupting influence that clouds judgment and leads people astray from true worship, emphasizing its seductive and deceptive nature. As the *"mother of all prostitutes,"* this entity encompasses various forms of spiritual unfaithfulness and idolatry. It's worth noting that in our current era of globalization and religious syncretism, we may be witnessing the early stages of this prophesied global religious system already taking shape.

In the next verses, the woman is depicted sitting on the Beast: *"Then he carried me away in the Spirit to a wilderness. I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand filled with everything detestable and with the impurities of her prostitution. On her forehead was written a name, a mystery: Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Detestable Things of the Earth. Then I saw that the woman was drunk on the blood of the saints and on the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished."*([Revelation 17:3-6](#)). This vivid imagery carries profound significance. The Beast, representing the Antichrist and his global political system, supports the woman (the false religious system), indicating a symbiotic relationship between political power and false religion ([James 4:4](#)). The scarlet color of the Beast symbolizes sin and bloodshed, while its blasphemous names reveal its open defiance against God ([Daniel 7:25](#)). The woman's attire of purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and precious stones, signifies her wealth, royalty, and seductive nature. This opulence masks her true corrupt nature, represented by the golden cup filled with abominations ([1 John 2:16](#)). The name on her forehead, *"Babylon the Great,"* links her to the historical enemy of God's people and symbolizes all systems opposed to God throughout history. Her title as *"Mother of Prostitutes"* suggests she's the source of all false religions, idolatries, and hedonistic philosophies that prioritize pleasure over godliness ([Jeremiah 3:6-10](#)). Most disturbingly, her intoxication with the blood of saints and witnesses to Jesus indicates severe persecution of true believers. This implies that this false religious system, in collaboration with the Antichrist's political power, will violently oppose those who remain faithful to Christ ([Matthew 24:9](#)). The vision serves as a stark warning to believers about the deceptive and destructive nature of false religion and hedonistic worldviews, especially when they align with worldly power, and calls for unwavering faithfulness to God even in the face of severe opposition ([Revelation 2:10](#)).

The angel then begins to explain the mystery to John in verses 7-14:

Then the angel said to me, 'Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up from the abyss and go to destruction. Those who live on the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast that was, and is not, and will be present again. This calls for a mind with wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated. They are also seven kings: Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes, he must remain for only a little while. The beast that was and is not, is itself an eighth king, but it belongs to the seven and is going to destruction. The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they will receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. These have one purpose, and they give their power and authority to the beast. These will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. Those with him are called, chosen, and faithful.'

This passage is rich with symbolism and prophetic significance. The beast described here represents the Antichrist, a figure of great evil and opposition to God. The description of the beast as one that "was, and is not, and is about to come" suggests a historical progression of empires culminating in the rise of the Antichrist, echoing the language of [Revelation 13:1-3](#). The seven heads, interpreted as both mountains and kings, likely symbolize the completeness of the Antichrist's dominion, both geographically and temporally, reminiscent of [Daniel 7:23-24](#). The fact that five have fallen, one is, and one is to come indicates a historical progression of empires: the five fallen empires being Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece; the one that "is" referring to the Roman Empire at the time of John's writing; and the one to come possibly representing a future global power. The beast itself being an eighth king *"belonging to the seven"* suggests that the Antichrist will emerge from or be closely associated with the previous seven empires. The ten horns, representing kings who had not yet received kingdoms at the time of John's writing, likely point to nations or political entities that will exist concurrently with the seventh head. These contemporary powers will align with the Antichrist, highlighting the global reach of his evil system. Their unified purpose in giving power to the beast demonstrates the consolidation of worldly authority against God, as prophesied in [Daniel 2:41-43](#). The reference to *"one hour"* in verse 12 is often interpreted symbolically to represent a short period, associated with the brief reign of the Antichrist mentioned in [Daniel 9:27](#). This interpretation suggests that these kings would reign alongside the seventh head (UN) for a limited time before the emergence of the Antichrist as the eighth king. However, the passage ends with a crucial promise: despite this formidable alliance of evil, the Lamb (Christ) will ultimately conquer, fulfilling the prophecy of [Daniel 2:44](#). This assurance of Christ's victory, even in the face of seemingly overwhelming opposition, serves as a powerful encouragement to believers, echoing [Romans 8:37](#). The description of those with Christ as *"called, chosen, and faithful"* emphasizes the security and special status of believers, as affirmed in [1 Peter 2:9](#), encouraging steadfastness in faith amidst trials.

Finally, [verses 15-18](#) foretell the Fall of Babylon: *"He also said to me, 'The waters you saw, where the prostitute was seated, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. The ten horns you saw, and the beast, will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, devour her flesh, and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his plan by having one purpose and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God are fulfilled. And the woman you saw is the great city that has royal power over the kings of the earth.'"* These final verses unveil the ultimate fate of the great prostitute (Babylon the Great). Remarkably, the very powers that once supported her will turn against her, bringing about her downfall. This dramatic shift is attributed to God's sovereign plan, reminding us that even amid evil and chaos, God remains in control. The dismantling of the false religious system clears the way for the Antichrist to establish himself as the sole object of worship, fulfilling the prophecy in [2 Thessalonians 2:3-4](#). This aligns with [Daniel 11:36-37](#), which portrays the Antichrist exalting himself above every god. The identification of the prostitute with "the great city that has royal power over the kings of the earth" (verse 18) is significant. This likely refers to Rome in John's time, symbolizing any system of worldly power that opposes God. It suggests that this false religious system will have global influence, affecting political and economic spheres. This connection between religious and political power echoes historical patterns where empires have used religion to consolidate their rule, warning believers to be wary of such alliances. Babylon's destruction thus serves multiple purposes: it demonstrates God's judgment on false religion, exposes the transient nature of worldly power, and sets the stage for the final confrontation between the Antichrist and the true King of Kings, as prophesied in [Revelation 19:19-20](#).

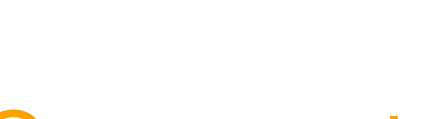
As we conclude our study of [Revelation 17](#), we must acknowledge the fact that despite its vivid imagery and complex symbolism, the central message remains clear: evil powers will rise and fall, but God's ultimate victory through Jesus Christ is assured. This theme of divine judgment and triumph continues into [Revelation 18](#), where we witness Babylon's fall in greater detail. For believers today, this chapter serves as both a warning and an encouragement. We're called to remain faithful to God in a world that often opposes His ways, exercising discernment against the seductive influences of worldly power and false ideologies. Yet, we can take heart, knowing Christ's victory is certain. As we move into [Revelation 18](#), we'll see God's judgment against evil systems executed, further emphasizing the importance of our faithfulness. Let's close with the words of [1 John 5:4-5](#), which encapsulate our hope in Christ: *"because everyone who has been born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith. Who is the one who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"* This victory is further illustrated in Revelation's coming chapters. May this study deepen our faith, sharpen our discernment, and strengthen our resolve to live for Christ in these complex times. As we prepare to explore [Revelation 18](#), let's carry forward the lessons learned here, anticipating God's continued revelation of His sovereign plan. Amen.

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